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How To Build a Backyard Bocce Court

In Italy they play bocce all the time, and Italians know how to live. You can bring this addictive old-world game to your property with one day's work.

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Building a basic bocce court is pretty simple. It's mostly fun to build, although not every step is fun. But it's always fun to use, bocce being an ancient recreation played on sun-dappled afternoons by weathered Italian men wearing panama hats and drinking jug wine.

The construction requires not much more than marking out a big rectangle, some digging, and spreading and compacting granular materials. It's a little work, but a court gives your game the predictability that rolling a ball on a lawn never will.

These Tools Will Help



DeWalt Tape Measure, 100-Foot

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Plans and Materials

Devon Jarvis/Ash Bartholomew

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Plot the Court

First decide how big you want your court. Regulation is 8 to 14 feet wide by up to 91 feet long. A more reasonable size is 8 to 10 feet wide by about 60 feet long. Really, you can make it any size you want. Once you decide the size, add to it the width of its border material. For example, if you will border the court with 4 x 4 pressure-treated lumber, as we did, add about 8 inches to the court's width and length.

Drive a wood stake to mark the first corner, and use a 100-foot tape measure to mark the first long side of the court's rectangle. Drive the second stake. Tie off a bright-orange mason's line stretched tight from stake to stake.

Working from this string line, measure the width of the court and drive a third stake at 90 degrees to the first or second stake. Do the same at the opposite end.

Stretch a second mason's line between stakes three and four, giving you two long parallel reference lines. An easy way to check for absolute parallel is to work with a helper and stretch a tape measure from either of the lines and swing the end of the tape in a short arc at various points along the rectangle. The crest of the arc is your court width.

This is more accurate than simply measuring across because it eliminates the need to measure precisely at 90 degrees to the reference line, which would be a pain. Carpenters, masons, and millwrights have used the swinging measure trick for generations. If the lines are not parallel, adjust one of the lines accordingly.

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Measure the diagonals, which should be equal, using a can of turf-marking paint, spray the rectangle onto the grass.

Dig and Install the Border

Remove the mason line but leave the stakes. Remove the sod with a flat shovel or rent a turf cutter.

The amount of excavation you do depends on how you build the court. If the ground is rocky and difficult to dig, it makes more sense to build the court up. If the ground is soft and sandy, and digging is relatively easy, dig down 2 to 4 inches, so long as you have somewhere to put the excavated soil or you can use the soil from one part of the court to level off another. This will still put your court slightly above grade, which is good. The lower you build, the more likely your court will become a bocce puddle in wet weather.

Lay the pressure-treated 4 x 4s in the trench, stacking them two high. Backfill the soil to keep the 4 x 4s in place, and fasten the 4 x 4s together with 10-inch spikes. The hardest part here is maintaining level and straightness. But remember, you're building a bocce court, not a house. Stretch string lines (from the stakes) whenever you need visual reference to keep the border straight.

To keep the materials in plane, use a 3-foot level for short sections. Hold the level to a straight 8-foot 2 x 4 to check longer lengths.

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Lay the Court

The play area is built in three layers. The coarsest layer is compacted at the bottom and covered with geotextile fabric. The next coarsest material is in the middle, and the finest material (the playing surface) goes on top. The specifics of your court material will depend on what's available where you live. For example, the bottom layer may be 1-inch washed crushed stone. The layer above that may be $\frac{3}{4}$ - or $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch crushed stone or gravel.

Put down the layers in declining thickness. The bottom layer is normally 3 to 4 inches thick, the next layer half that, and the top an inch or so.

The following materials are recommended for the playing surface itself:



Sand

Works well, easy to obtain, inexpensive, but it can require careful raking and smoothing, and moist compacting before the match.

Thanit Weerawan//Getty Images



Stone Dust

This is the finest crushed stone with dust-size particles blended in. It goes by various names, depending on where in the country you live. Sometimes it's known by the specification number of the state or county highway department. When compacted, it's quite firm.

././Getty Images



Tennis Court Clay

Nice, a little harder to get, a little more expensive, can be purchased through tennis court supply houses on the Web or locally. [Har-Tru](#) is the most well-known brand.

Har-Tru



Processed Oyster Shell

Many bocce players consider [this](#) to be the best surface. The fine, platelike shape of the ground shell helps it to self-level after a rain. It's a West Coast product that's shipped directly from the West or from East Coast warehouses.

bocce mon

Now you're ready to play some Bocce. *In bocca al lupo.*



[Roy Berendsohn](#)

Senior Home Editor

Roy Berendsohn has worked for more than 25 years at Popular Mechanics, where he has written on carpentry, masonry, painting, plumbing, electrical, woodworking, blacksmithing, welding, lawn care, chainsaw use, and outdoor power equipment. When he's not working on his own house, he volunteers with Sovereign Grace Church doing home repair for families in rural, suburban and urban locations throughout central and southern New Jersey.

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